

Orlenskaya Deva: Is 70-year-old Mirella Freni believable as 19-year-old Joan of Arc? Absolutely not. But then opera needs a lot of suspension of disbelief. Is it believable that lame, hunchbacked Rigoletto thinks he is lugging the Duke in that sack? (Think Luciano Pavarotti.) Even when it turns out that it is his daughter in that sack, many sopranos outweigh many baritones (think Renata Tebaldi or Sharon Sweet vs. Sherrill Milnes). But did Mirella sing well? Absolutely yes. This is no role for a young ingenue - it requires a strong, mature voice. Okay, maybe not up to Wagner's Isolde or Brunhilde, but certainly not for a Mimi (Boheme), Micaela (Carmen) or Suzanna (Marriage of Figaro). Freni's voice has aged very well, it is still gloriously strong and pure, with dead-on intonation and very little vibrato. A slight roughness now and then in the top register, but overall most satisfying. Many years ago at Chicago's Lyric we heard an aging Joan Sutherland struggling in Donizetti's Anna Bolena when she was spectacularly upstaged by Polish mezzo Stefania Toczyska - thankfully, this did not happen here, and Mirella held her own.

The music was just gorgeous - Tchaikovsky's lush, sumptuous late-romantic orchestrations, with lots of brass (reminiscent of his late symphonies), and supported by some excellent singing. There was a large contingent of Russians and other post-Soviets in the cast, and all were at least good, some great. The second soprano role, Agnes Sorel, the Dauphin's mistress, was sung by Maira Kerey of Kazakhstan, with a voice that gave up nothing to Freni's. Too bad hers is such a small part - a duet with the lead would have been really interesting. The men were perhaps short of spectacular, but no complaints. The best was bass Feodor Kuznetsov as the Archbishop, again a regrettably small part.

The weakest link was the production, directed by Lamberto Puggelli and set/costume design by Luisa Spinatelli - it was at the same time too static and too fussy. Static because the soloists and chorus are mostly rooted to one spot on the stage - even the climactic duel between Joan and Lionel of Burgundy takes place off-stage. Fussy because there is excessive movement of scrims, flies and curtains - dropping, rising, opening, closing. A neat touch was that scrims were dropped from overhead with the lower edge billowing, then when no longer needed, usually they were dropped by releasing the top edge, which would cause the whole thing to billow to the stage floor. Often the curtain was then used as a stage prop by the characters or chorus, for example, as a regal cape, and thus pulled offstage. It was an interesting effect, but overall, I would prefer more movement of people and less mechanics. The on-scrim and through-scrim effects were not as spectacular as some we had seen at Chicago's Lyric - e.g. Verdi's Attila, Wagner's Tristan & Isolde, and especially Strauss' Frau ohne Schatten. The one exception was the final scene of burning at the stake, which was sorta spectacular, with the whole stage seemingly consumed by flames. I especially liked the WashTimes review of the staging.

Reviews:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A5808-2005Mar27.html>

<http://washtimes.com/entertainment/20050328-122031-8511r.htm>